

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 437 638

CS 013 851

AUTHOR Osborn, Jean; Stahl, Steven; Stein, Marcy
TITLE Teachers' Guidelines for Evaluating Commercial Phonics Packages.
INSTITUTION International Reading Association, Newark, DE.
PUB DATE 1997-00-00
NOTE 17p.
AVAILABLE FROM International Reading Association, 800 Barksdale Road, P.O. Box 8139, Newark, DE 19714-8139 (\$4.95). Web site: <http://www.reading.org>.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Beginning Reading; Instructional Materials; *Media Selection; *Phonics; Primary Education; *Program Evaluation; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Materials; Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS *Commercially Prepared Materials

ABSTRACT

The number of packages--kits, games, computer discs, audiotapes, and videotapes--offering phonics instruction is growing almost daily. These commercial packages are marketed to parents to use with their children or to teachers and school districts as supplements to classroom programs of reading instruction. This booklet outlines questions which should be asked about these programs and offers some ways to evaluate their effectiveness. The booklet discusses some characteristics of good reading instruction and considers how good phonics instruction fits into the instructional plan. (Contains 13 additional sources of information.) (NKA)

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Teachers' ¹ GUIDELINES for Evaluating Commercial PHONICS Packages

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Jean Osborn
Steven Stahl
Marcy Stein

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Lots of people seem to be interested in phonics instruction....

How do we know?

The number of packages—kits, games, computer discs, audiotapes, and videotapes—offering phonics instruction is growing almost daily. Marketed to parents to use with their children or to teachers and school districts as supplements to classroom programs of reading instruction, these packages often promise quick and easy mastery of reading.

What is in these packages?

The materials in these packages differ in many ways. They vary in the way they look, in the way they approach instruction, and in their length, cost, durability, and ease of use. Their intended audience also varies—some are developed for young children, others claim to be useful with students of any age, and a few are for adult learners.

The phonics packages also differ in the types of materials they provide and the instructional media they use to present the materials. Some are in the form of video- or audiotapes; others are designed for the computer. Some depend on traditional print materials such as workbooks, flash cards, and storybooks; others take the form of games or toys. Some packages combine different materials and media.

How effective are phonics packages?

In the years that the International Reading Association has been monitoring this growing industry, we have found some disturbing trends:

- Advertising claims are often confusing and misleading.
- Materials are difficult to evaluate.
- Claims of effectiveness are almost impossible to verify.

This booklet has been developed to help teachers and other potential users make some decisions about whether they should purchase a phonics package, and if so, what they should look for in a package.

The suggestions in this booklet are based on research on phonics instruction and on a careful analysis of more than 20 of the available phonics packages.

First, let's talk about reading....

Reading is complicated. Children who are readers—that is, children who read eagerly, with pleasure and understanding—combine the meanings of the printed language they are reading with what they already know. They use the knowledge they possess to help them comprehend what they read. Children who are readers also know how to identify printed words quickly and accurately. They can focus on the meaning of what they are reading because they know how to read the printed words effortlessly. They can relate the words in print to their own knowledge of those words' sounds and meanings.

Essentially all of the commercial phonics packages focus on the relationships of letters to sounds. Some people think that instruction about the relationships of individual letters and groups of letters to their sounds (for example, /s/, /m/, /bl/, /sh/, /oi/, /ea/) is all that children need to know in learning to read. Although this kind of instruction can be helpful for many children, it is only one aspect of learning to read.

What kinds of activities will help children become readers?

Activities that help children learn about letters and sounds are certainly important. But many other activities are equally important, especially the kinds that

- help children develop an awareness of print;
- encourage children to hear sounds in spoken words;
- provide children with opportunities to write letters, words, signs, messages, and their own stories;
- offer children lots of opportunities to practice by reading books and other print materials;
- familiarize children with different kinds of literature, both fiction and nonfiction; and
- encourage good discussions to stimulate language and vocabulary growth.

What about reading books to children?

Children need to hear lots of stories read aloud. Listening to books read aloud is an important part of learning to read. While they listen to books and talk about books, children are hearing and using the kinds of words and sentences they will soon be reading themselves. While they watch someone read a book and turn its pages, they are not only looking at the pictures, but are also developing important ideas about printed letters and words.

Reading aloud to children provides them with experiences that expand their horizons and stimulate their imaginations. Most children love to hear their favorite books read over and over again. These experiences help them understand that the goal of reading is meaning—and that books are interesting, informative, and entertaining!

How do children learn about letters and sounds?

Many children learn about letters and sounds when they are read to. A child can learn about the sounds of words when his or her parent reads: "And then the bad, baaaaad wolf roared," and then says, "I'll tell you he rrrrealllly rrrroooooaaarrrred!" Children have other experiences that promote the learning of letters and sounds: looking at alphabet books, playing with magnetic letters on the refrigerator, using letters to play games and do word puzzles, writing letters and words with crayons and pencils, or watching while an adult transcribes what they dictate.

What about organized letter and sound instruction?

Research about beginning reading instruction indicates that, for many children, early and organized instruction about letters and sounds will help them understand how the patterns of letters in written words represent the sounds of spoken words of English. This is called the *alphabetic principle*.

Most young children learn to recognize many words out of context or "at sight," and they can also identify street and store signs, package names, and other words within their familiar contexts. Still, children need help in applying what they are learning about letter-sound relationships to figure out words they have never seen before. They need to learn how to "sound out" unfamiliar words and to use this strategy for making sense of words they encounter when they read.

But sounding out is only a phase in learning to read, and it is only one of many useful strategies children learn to use. With sufficient practice, children will begin to recognize most words quickly and easily, and they will put their word-identification strategies to use only when they encounter unfamiliar words.

The term *phonics instruction* is most often used to describe the aspect of reading instruction that helps children understand letter-sound correspondences. Good phonics instruction can help children learn how to figure out the pronunciation of new words that they encounter in print.

The purposes of phonics packages

Parents, teachers, and school district personnel purchase commercial phonics packages for many different reasons. They may want to introduce children to the alphabetic principle in an organized manner. They may want to provide some supplemental instruction for children who seem to be lagging behind in learning to read. Or, they may be concerned about improving children's spelling skills.

Identifying your expectations for a commercial phonics package is the first step in determining which of the many packages best fits your needs. You may realize, however, that your classroom activities for reading instruction are sufficient and that you do not need to purchase a commercial package.

If you are thinking about purchasing a phonics package because you want to provide children with an additional experience with letters and sounds, then some of the letter and sound games and toys may meet your needs.

However, if you intend to purchase a package to help struggling readers, we would like to caution you to examine the content of the packages carefully and to be wary of unrealistic claims. There is no "quick fix" for children who are struggling with reading, despite the claims made for many packages. Claims that sound too good to be true often are just that—too good to be true. If a phonics package implies that its instruction is all that is needed to turn children into readers, be cautious!

Some characteristics of good reading instruction

Listed here are some characteristics of good reading instruction that have been verified by reading research. You will find that some phonics packages demonstrate these characteristics—and some do not. Specific questions to ask about the commercial phonics packages are included for you to use as you evaluate a product for classroom use.

Good phonics instruction is only one part of beginning reading instruction.

Reading instruction has many different goals. In addition to helping children learn to recognize words quickly and accurately, reading instruction and practice should help children

- comprehend what they read,
- enjoy reading,
- value reading as a worthwhile activity, and
- feel competent as readers and writers.

A question to ask:

In addition to letter and sound instruction, does the package provide or recommend including other types of reading and writing activities?

Good phonics instruction helps children recognize the individual sounds that make up spoken words.

Phonics is the relationship between patterns of letters and sounds in written words. To best understand phonics instruction, children need to understand that the patterns of sounds in spoken words can be separated into distinct sounds. This is called *phonological awareness*. Learning to distinguish the individual sounds that are contained in spoken words is part of learning to read. For example, children are revealing their phonological awareness when they understand that the "stretched-out" sounds of the spoken word *cat* /cccaaat/ can be put back together into the spoken word *cat*. Of course, they also need to recognize that the word *cat* stands for something they know.

Phonological awareness contributes to ease of learning to read. Activities that promote phonological awareness include

- learning nursery rhymes and other poems,
- listening for and segmenting beginning and ending sounds in spoken words,
- substituting initial and final consonants in spoken "lists" of words, and
- doing word "stretching" exercises that involve saying a word slowly and then putting it back together again.

Questions to ask:

Does the package include rhyming activities?

Does the package include other activities that will provide children with practice in distinguishing sounds in spoken words?

Good phonics instruction helps children recognize letters and also understand the relationship between letters and the sounds they stand for.

Good instruction, designed to develop children's awareness of the relationship between letters and the sounds they stand for, can enhance the possibility of children's learning to read and write successfully. Look for instructional activities that help children learn to

- identify the letters,
- distinguish one letter from another, and
- identify the sounds that individual letters or groups of letters represent.

Good phonics packages provide instruction in letter recognition that is sequenced so that the letters presented in a lesson are not confusing. For example, *b*, *d*, and *p* should not be presented in the same lesson because they look so much alike and their names are so similar. Likewise, if pictures are used to help children learn letters and sounds, they should be clear and not confusing. For example, a picture of a cup that looks like a mug could be confusing; is the first sound in its name /m/ for *mug* or /c/ for *cup*?

Questions to ask:

Does the package provide for the teaching of letter names?

Does the instruction help children understand the relationship between letters and the sounds they stand for?

Are the instructions clear?

Are the activities instructive?

Remember: Not all activities that are labeled "phonics instruction" are effective. Effective phonics instruction fits into a comprehensive program of reading instruction.

Good phonics instruction provides related reading practice.

Children need to read stories. Good phonics instruction provides children with many different kinds of reading activities. Although some early reading activities may involve reading isolated words, word lists, and single sentences, such activities do not help children understand what real, purposeful reading is all about. Experiences with real stories and books teach that reading involves making sense from text.

The best kinds of stories to give children practice and to promote independent reading are ones that

- contain lots of words that use the specific letter-sound relationships that have been taught,
- have some predictable story lines so that children can anticipate what comes next,
- contain rhyming words and repeated sentences, and
- are about familiar and other interesting topics.

Just as children like to hear favorite stories many times, they like to read them over and over. Repeated reading of the same story improves children's word recognition, fluency, and comprehension. When stories are presented in a "big book" format, children can easily reread them together.

Even when children begin to read independently, reading aloud to them is still an important part of the literacy curriculum. Reading a variety of books and stories to children (both fiction and nonfiction) helps them discover the literate world of print. Reading aloud also will increase their vocabulary knowledge, enhance their knowledge of the world, and provide them with an understanding of story structure and other print forms.

Questions to ask:

Does the package provide interesting and high-quality stories and other materials for children to read?

Do the materials provided include many words that children can figure out by using the letter and sound relationships they are being taught?

Remember: If a phonics package does not provide opportunities for lots of reading practice but otherwise seems to meet your needs and expectations, you can supplement what it does offer. You can get lists of recommended books from your district media specialist or school librarian, and you can look for simple books at a children's bookstore or at the public library. The International Reading Association publishes lists of books children like; see the references at the end of this booklet.

Good phonics instruction promotes spelling and writing practice.

Good phonics instruction can help children understand how spelling works. This understanding helps children to become good readers—and good writers. When children write, they apply their understanding of letter-sound relationships to express their own ideas. In this way, writing activities support phonics instruction.

Good phonics programs may include three kinds of writing activities: those in which teachers transcribe what students dictate, those in which students write words that are read to them, and those free-writing activities that encourage children to write whatever they want. If a package does not contain those activities, you can add them. Making paper available to children for their free-time use encourages them to express themselves in writing every day. You can encourage children to write at other times, through activities such as

- composing letters and notes,
- keeping a log or journal,

- making signs,
- compiling lists, and
- writing stories on their drawings.

Questions to ask:

Does the package provide opportunities for children to apply what they are learning by writing? If not,

Is the package flexible enough to allow you to include spelling and writing opportunities along with the instruction?

Remember: Beginning readers and writers often do not spell every word correctly, and in fact may not even represent all of the sounds with letters. As children gain experience with reading and writing, their spelling will improve.

Good phonics programs offer a reasonable time schedule and sequence of lessons.

Try to determine how much time the phonics lessons will take. Lessons are most effective when they are relatively short. Some packages are divided into distinct daily lessons that have a beginning, middle, and end; others offer a series of activities. Packages with distinct lessons are often easier to use because they usually

- follow a sequence,
- present new information slowly, lesson by lesson,
- provide some review of what has been taught, and
- give children opportunities to practice what they are learning.

You should be wary of packages that rely on a lot of specialized terminology. Phonics instruction does not need special vocabulary to be effective. It is important that instructional materials, explanations, and practice activities be clear and easy to understand.

Questions to ask:

Does the package have reasonable time demands?

Is there any reason to suspect that the package may be confusing or frustrating to use?

Do the explanations include a lot of special terminology?

Remember: Packages that are well organized and include clear directions are easier to use and likely to be more fun for you and the children you teach. Packages that are frustrating to use are not likely to provide effective instruction.

Good programs are carefully developed and provide evidence of effectiveness.

Before you decide on a package, we urge you to seek out information about its development and use. See if any research studies have been conducted to evaluate its effectiveness, and try to find information from others who have used the materials.

Questions to ask:

What are the developer's goals and claims?

How long has the package been on the market?

What are the qualifications of the people who developed the package?

Is there credible evidence that the package has been effective over time and with large numbers of students?

For what age children is the package intended?

What does the package cost?

Remember: The cost of the phonics package may not be related to its overall effectiveness.

The decision is up to you....

We hope this publication has helped you make a decision about whether you will purchase a phonics package to use with your students. Whether you decide to purchase a package or to continue with your own program of reading instruction, we urge you to communicate closely with each student's parents so that they can support and reinforce what you are doing in school.

Remember: It is time well spent when you take the time to

- read aloud to children;
- talk about books, stories, and poems;
- play games and sing songs with letters, sounds, and rhymes;
- transcribe what children dictate;
- encourage writing activities; and
- listen to children reading aloud.

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**Reading
Association**

800 Barksdale Road

PO Box 8139

Newark, Delaware 19714-8139, USA

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97-16 PUB 3/97 REV 7/97